

Vishwaprea Suparsad (1948–2006)

Given the scope, complexity and duration of the liberation struggle, it has, inevitably, produced its unsung heroes and heroines. But, also, as new people have surged into our movement, specially recently, we have tended to ignore our tried-and-tested own. Of course, the new generation of activists cannot be clones of the ‘struggle generation’, but there has to be a measure of continuity. There has to, at least, be an overlap of core values and goals. But, sadly, the links of past and present are beginning to fray. The recent, untimely death of the relatively unknown 57-year-old Pietermaritzburg-born struggle veteran, raises these and related issues.



Vishwaprea Suparsad

Quiet, sturdy, sensitive, humane, humble, self-effacing, brave ‘Vish’ Suparsad made a significant contribution to the struggle against apartheid, both in the legal mass movement and the underground political and military structures. But unlike so many of us, he had no culture of entitlement. He asked for nothing in return; and, quietly, continued to contribute to the consolidation of our democracy. As the traditional values of the ANC-led movement begin to fade, we need to extol the contribution of Suparsad and others like him.

Suparsad was born in Plessislaer on December 10, 1948, the youngest of eight children of the respected Dookran family. He was influenced by his parents who became part of the progressive reform tradition in Hinduism led by Swami Dayanand, the founder of the Arya Samaj movement. His mother, Ma Dookran as she became known, was in later years often used by the NIC (Natal Indian Congress) as a symbol of opposition to apartheid.

In an interview with academics Suparsad was very nostalgic about his childhood experiences in Plessislaer, especially the proximity with Africans and the inter-racial contact. In 1965, Indians were forcibly removed from Plessislaer—which left a deep impression. In 1966, he took part in a demonstration against Republic Day at Woodlands High School.

He qualified as a teacher but left for England and Canada to further his studies. He returned shortly after the outbreak of the June 1976 student revolts. Soon thereafter, he met Pravin Gordhan, the current South African Revenue Service Commissioner, who was a major influence on him. ‘It was a two-way process,’ says Gordhan. ‘He also influenced me. He had so many strengths, after all.’ The two developed a lifelong friendship and comradeship.

Among others, they were influential in shaping a new approach to mass organisation which creatively linked people’s ‘bread-and-butter’ concerns, such as water, electricity, rents and housing to the broader goal of overthrowing apartheid. As part of an overall strategy, they also stressed the need for considerable flexibility of tactics and organisational forms that took into account the differing conditions between and within the different racial communities.

Suparsad worked as a community worker at the Tongaat Child Welfare Society from 1977 to 1980. He established the Tongaat Youth Group and worked closely with

the Tongaat Civic Association, especially in its links with the struggles in neighbouring Hambanathi. He was active in the NIC and also kept in touch with organisations in Pietermaritzburg.

In 1980 he moved to Durban to establish a CRU (Community Research Unit), which gave research, organisational and other support to community organisations, including the Durban Housing Action Committee and the Joint Rent Action Committee. He also assisted trade union, cultural, religious and other organisations. Together with others, he played a role in the launch of the UDF (United Democratic Front).

For all his prodigious legal activities, he was also a key underground operative for both the ANC and SACP. In 1979 he established contact with the ANC in Swaziland and regularly crossed the borders to ferry arms, literature, equipment and operatives. In 1985 he underwent a short training course in intelligence in East Germany. With the police hot on his heels, he largely disappeared into the underground from 1986, and played a key role in Operation Vula. In 1989 he married Vidhu Vedalankar, an activist, in a small 'underground' wedding. Their close and formidable partnership bore a son, Viraj, now 15.

After the ANC's unbanning he served in various roles, including in local government transformation, housing, development of small sugar farmers, co-operatives and micro-financing. His very wide range of activities made an impact on people from all walks of life.

His well-attended memorial service in the Durban City Hall was addressed by 12 people from very different spheres, including KwaZulu-Natal Premier Sbu Ndebele who described him as a 'hero and a revolutionary who lived a noble life and embodied all that we think a dedicated activist should be'.

Suparsad was a rare combination of mass activist, underground operative, theoretician, strategist, organiser and counsellor. More than his contribution, it was his character and personality that impacted on everybody. He was fundamentally kind and he was humane to the core. He had a quiet, calming presence. Of course, he must have had his weaknesses—but no one knows of them. There was not an ill-word spoken of him, surely rare in politics!

Everybody speaks about his empathy. He seemed to listen to people with his very soul. SACP Gauteng Secretary, Vishwas Satgar, Suparsad's nephew, says: 'He had the capacity to sit quietly through a conversation. But as you shared with him, he genuinely placed himself in your life. It was his nodding head, his pensive brow, his way of sometimes repeating words you used that told you this. But more than anything it was his response—you knew he'd understood everything you'd said.'

In these trying times in our movement, it is vital that we focus on the lives of Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki and others like them. But these are giants—and difficult to emulate. Hence the importance of also focusing on the Suparsads of our movement who are more accessible—and there are many of them. We should acknowledge them before they die.

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(With acknowledgement to *The Witness*)